

# ATS finds success with video conferences for peer learning

By LISA KERN

*The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) hosted a series of video conferences in August and September to connect with those member schools who received innovation grants as part of the Educational Models and Practices Project.*



The 11 video conferences, with the main goal being to help the schools collaborate, replaced the face-to-face forum that was originally scheduled to be held this fall in Pittsburgh.

ATS staff decided that a more efficient and effective process would be to group the projects by type of work and topic, and host small groups of project directors and others through video conferences. Stephen Graham, ATS senior director of programs and services who is serving as director of the Educational Models and Practices Project, stated that many of the groups fell naturally into categories such as those with a global focus, those employing online educational technologies, a group engaging forms of competency-based education, and one made up of schools developing programs to serve Spanish-speaking populations.

“This first set of peer learning video conferences was kind of an experiment to see if something like this would work, and it ended up working very well,” said Graham.

“All together, there was so much time and money saved, as everyone didn’t have to physically travel and coordinate their schedules in order to be a part of it.”

Participating project directors were asked to submit two-page reports in advance, and those reports were circulated to other schools in their same groups ahead of time. According to Graham, this enhanced the video conference discussions—lasting anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half—and made question and answer sessions much more effective than if the information had been incorporated into a very large gathering with all project participants in attendance.

“It gave me an opportunity to interact with each project—something I wouldn’t have been able to do in the same way at a big group event,” said Graham. He highlighted three member schools’ projects in his latest [blog](#), remarking how people from such different schools can have such common issues and concerns.

ATS used Zoom software to conduct the video conferences. Participants were emailed a link ahead of time that took them directly to a screen where they could join the conversation. Zoom can be used with a device that has a built-in camera and a microphone, or participants can call a toll-free number to listen and speak while interacting with other conference-goers visually on their screens. In addition, a participant can simply dial in and treat the conversation as a conference call.

"I like that Zoom allows us to leverage the visual aspects of communication, as well as the verbal ones," said Stacy Williams-Duncan, interim director of digital learning and visiting professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, who participated in the video conferences. "It was energizing to see colleagues I already knew and meet new ones who I share interests with. I hope our groups will have the opportunity to gather again as our grant projects progress and mature."

When asked about follow-up after the video conferences, Graham said that one group has created its own Facebook group to continue the discussion and other groups asked if they could reconvene with another video conference at a later date. Other participants were interested in using Sharefile—a secure file sharing and transfer service—to continue assisting one another and exchanging ideas.

"Much of the wisdom about best models and practices in theological education was already present in our schools, and we knew that," shared Graham. "This project has helped to build on that, and the video conferences were yet another way to share it."



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